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ABSTRACT

Pornography, while attempting on the level of comic book fantasy to approach a complex adult activity, merely serves to cheat its audience out of true and total sexuality. For adolescents passing through phases of great interest and preoccupation with pornographic books and films, the classroom often presents the only opportunity for frank, open discussion of this subject. In making students aware of the short-sighted attitudes of pornographic works, and by determining objective criteria for judging this material, the teacher can hopefully offer a more mature level on which students can begin to see themselves as complex sexual beings. (MF)

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PORNOGRAPHY: OUR CONCERN ALSO

by Gordon T. Osing

It can happen under any of several circumstances. Perhaps someone intercepts among several older boys a small collection of novels of the sort that are typically titled *Barnyard Stud*. The Principal is brought into the case and he, enlightened, asks you to have a word with the boys about the dangers of such literature. Or perhaps your local cinema showed "The Babysitter" last weekend and the kids bait you Monday morning, asking whether they ought to have seen this flick. Many kids who didn't join in, grinning, and suddenly you are being queried about the merits of films ranging from "Doctor Doolittle" to "The Immoral Mr. Tease." Or, perish the thought, perhaps several PTA devotees confront you to ask when you will take action on *The Catcher in the Rye,* which their children, ranging in grade from seventh to twelfth, have recently read. The Chairman joins the conversation and at least dampens the ground a little by putting you on the program for April, "Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth / Inspired hath in every holt and heeth / The tendre croppes," the topic to be "Pornography and the High School Student." It can happen under any of these circumstances. (If none of these develops, you may wish to create your own opportunity to shed a little daylight on this topic.) The point is that any secondary English teacher who omits this subject, or the occasion to talk with pupils about it, is fooling himself about where his students are, and is running some risk of abandoning them totally to the wolves and skir-hawks of our current market places. Indications are that both parents and students need a little daylight on the subject.

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And let us be clear, to begin with, about what pornography is (and is not) and how it originates. The first concern is immensely subjective and variable. Pornography "is" nothing until a person or a society establishes its characteristics. In cases, one era's scatology is another's amusement and/or inspiration. It does no good for our cause to be caught praising Chaucer's and Shakespeare's and Twain's ribaldries and condemning those features in Joyce, Vidal, and Mailer. There has always been that fleshy and delightful sort of story, and it also serves our humanity, which includes the flesh. Nor should we teach that true intellectualism, in its fullest flower, disdains the body for the soul. Virtually the whole host of

writers in English tell us that, contrary to our occasional cultural schizophrenia, earth is our home. Your youngsters are probably already reading Steinbeck, Hemingway, and *Good-bye Columbus*. Some have discovered Roethke and Dylan Thomas. Certainly you cannot help but discuss with them, and they cannot help but notice, the strong sexual content in the poems and stories of many famous (even textbook) writers. Pornography is not, I mean to say, sexuality. It is not even intercourse, or breasts, or any other act or section of anatomy.

I think it helpful to think of pornography as attempts to short circuit individuals' rights and powers to produce their own notions about sexuality and the nature of a sexual relationship. It may be thought of as nothing more than an application of comic book style and complexity to adult sexual activity. One has merely to adduce the thinness and monotony of the plots, the substitution of caricature for characterization, and the dependence on diction and ritual to replace action and real emotion. Surely no adult who has ever had a successful and fulfilling relationship with another adult can resist being slightly amused by the language and insipidity of a hard core "novel." Such a book would be an extremely pale last choice for involvement, surely. This just has to be a case in which "The Real Thing" is to be preferred. And I should think my suggested definition leaves all the room in the world for the responsible writer to amuse or even arouse our senses of sexuality. I will even insist that such a task is some part of his duty to us. The difference between the bonafide author and the skin-hawk will be that the former will deliver into our hands our total selves; the latter will be congenitally disinclined and incapable of that.

Pornography, as I would see it defined, inevitably cheats us out of true and total sexuality. It offers instead repetitious and extremely limited sexual acts. It disallows the coy conversation, flirtation, the chance meetings of eyes and hands, intimacy, and a host of other non-coital human pleasures. It reduces us to paranoid rabbits who are not even capable of noticing the grander rhythms and instances of our own sexuality.

It is important to note here that your students did not write or publish the books one finds. Nor did they make the movies. The hard core stuff is produced by our generation, the one that grew up on Superman and Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. It is not entirely funny to allege a connection between this fact and the

characteristics of pornography suggested above. One notes that hard core pornography almost always reflects middle class fantasies about prowess and ecstasies. One actually suspects that the stuff is being written by men who have little first hand information about healthy sexuality. Much of it, indeed, seems written by men with strong homosexual tendencies, sons, perhaps of the very busy fathers of the late forties and early fifties, sons, to complete the circle of grim humor, who grew up on the idealized fantasies of the comics. In whatever senses these intuitions may prove valid, so will the sexual ineffectiveness and perennial hang-ups of so many of that generation have been revealed. Most of the burlesque shows are closed these days. And the strip joints are left to the middle-aged salesman and conventioneers, in town on a lark. Skin flicks are, traditionally, for the old men, for the loners.

Except that adolescents and pre-adolescents are also being attracted to this sort of entertainment. And they are sharing books like *Barnyard Stud*. And they are forming notions about what sex is and about their own sexuality. Surely it will be fatal and repetitious for them to accept the assumptions and attitudes of the skin hawks for their own. We ought to prefer giving them a basis for choosing their own way on such matters and leaving them alone to choose.

That basis ought to be their own, and therefore every other person's humanity. No one wants to be used, or thought of as a commodity for someone else's convenience. It is true in all phases of human behavior that one gives of one's self in order to receive. One labors, one invests, one handles, one hopes, one loves. And there are returns and fulfillments to be realized. Human community is one. Another is a love-sex relationship. What can we do but pity the isolation and hopelessness of a predator, in society or in love and sex. Such a one degrades himself increasingly as he demands anonymity of his victims. Yet this kind of narrow and doomed sexuality is exactly that which the hard core material teaches. It is as if masturbation were all one had. And this kind of limited and lonely sex diminishes the humanity of its enthusiasts. Young people are quite in need of being shown just that.

Furthermore, such materials reduce sexuality to hasty and meaningless intercourse, a reduction that, if it were true, would make celibacy an irresistably attractive alternative. Fortunately the miracle and mystery of sexuality are more complex and rewarding

than that limited view. Relationships between mothers and daughters, between fathers and sons, between teachers and classes, between friends, even between strangers, can have sexual meanings, or overtones. Sex is, as we hear occasionally, something one is, not something one does. Sexuality is bound up also in how one dresses, walks, talks with peers, and expresses "self." One ought not be ashamed to be interesting, or to be interested in a variety of persons, to enjoy the "self" they present for interaction. And there is an endless variety of human relationships to be noticed. There are situations to test our generosity, amusements to try our powers of observation, habits and traits to pique our curiosities. How in the world have so many of our young people come to believe that sex is something one does, right or wrong, when one can? I suppose we all know well enough, though it is not pleasant to know. The message in so many homes, and on the telee, and on the billboards, and at the movies has done its work.

All the more reason to be busy with the process of inoculation! Where does one start? With questions for the youngsters to debate and discuss? (For instances: Is nudity of any kind in a film a condemning feature? How does "The Graduate" differ from "Miniskirt Mob"? Is "Midnight Cowboy" a dirty movie? What is "realism"? Why is explicit sex in books a salable commodity?) I should think, by all means, that we ought to be prepared to comment on and to hear comment on anything a student has read or seen. Your class ought to be the place (perhaps the only place) where people need not be afraid of words, which are not, after all, objects. Youngsters can, as we know quite well, be led to a conclusion to which they cannot be pushed. And I hasten to add that adolescents today are not necessarily dirtier than their counterparts of the fifties, or of the forties, or of the thirties. They simply have more time and money and mobility. And a number of maladjusted older "uncles" and "fathers" who have mastered the application of mass production and marketing processes to the phenomenon of pornography. One hopes the tragedy will not, need not become cyclical.

The essential nature and dangers of pornography must be shown, it seems to me. Mature analysis and a little common sense must be brought into play. Traditional scatology will be seen to rest on two extravagant fantasies, the myths of the willing woman and of the endlessly virile man. Neither exists in this world or is

promised in the next. Both are fantasies of a repressed and anxious male mentality. And both are a threat to a healthy and active sex life, including outlooks, attitudes toward women, capabilities for tenderness, and virtually all facets of casual, courting, and love-sex relationships. Both fantasies lead the unstable to expect what will not be forthcoming in reality and to miss the really ready pleasures of friendships and love intimacies. That such intimacies should come after marriage, as the majority in our society believes, is not a qualifying condition. Attitudes toward women and sexuality and self are formed long before the wedding ceremony. Specifically, pornography typically encourages the substitution of irrelevant and self-centered sex fantasies for a free and responsive sexuality. Unreal attitudes, carried into adulthood and marriage, will make a full and human sex life difficult. For at the heart of the primary myths of pornography is the necessity to sub- and super-humanize the aggressor and/or the object, to dehumanize intimacy itself, to render it as ideally and mechanically pleasurable. This idealization can be compared with the common semantic lapse of acting and thinking as if words were objects. There is, in fact, a strong tendency on the part of the pornographers to rely on stock phrases and exaggerated descriptions, or on cliche clutches and comic book characterizations in the movies, an obvious unwillingness or incapability to let the sex be natural and tender. And the language of both the books and the movies is inflationary. What was prosaic or implicit even five years ago has evolved rapidly into the hyper-metaphored. It must be one of the more pitiable examples in our time of words having become experiences themselves, or of contrived pictures having become a life themselves that is to be preferred to that outside the theatre. This sort of disassociation from reality surely, at least in its extremes of habit or the state of being moved totally, ought to be thought of as a form of mental illness.

I do not know what we can do for individuals who must, ideally, wait after puberty anywhere from seven to fifteen years to "know" fulfillment of a sexual drive. Most of them are extremely good at preserving before our eyes an appearance of neutrality, or at most, of charming pubescence. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to simply let them go on believing we are that naive ourselves. Then it will be a vast game of mutual and generous deception. This course may, in fact, be tantamount to that wise old modus

operandi best called minding one's own business. I should think that the most light and guidance about pornography can be created if we make little effort to translate our analyses of it into simple and, after all, personal codes. Honesty and humanity and common sense conspire soon enough to make almost all pornography look small and desperate and selfish. I believe we may leave it at that, be rewarded, in fact, that we achieved that.

I hasten to add that the appearance of a dirty book in your school, or snickers in your classroom about a skinflick is not the occasion for caustic wit and massive array against smut. It seems entirely normal to me for an average adolescent to be at one time or the other immensely interested in a sex book or movie. Indeed, one might better busy himself about someone who, at fifteen to eighteen, has had no association at all with someone of the opposite sex and claims not to need it. A certain amount of sexual energy is probably, at least by adolescents, best released by a little scatology now and then. Rest assured, such an interest momentarily expressed will not ruin a boy or girl for life. (Did it?) All ought to be curious and, after all, the varsity basketball team only needs so many players. Let your reaction be proportionate and composed, and impersonal.

I suppose we are still several years away from a time when a class could actually explicate a sample of pornography in a classroom. And it may even stretch too far our reasonable expectations of an adolescent, especially of a younger one, to initiate such a frank and open pursuit in one of our classes, though the movies have probably made this possibility more real and handy than the books and pictures did. More power to you if you can gain the confidence and openness of youngsters to pursue such a discussion. By all means, proceed however you can! More commonly a teacher may have to either simply respond with honesty and precision to a few student questions, or, with that same honesty and precision, to tactfully pick his time to suggest the nature and effects of pornography. Occasions in the study of semantics and linguistics, and in the study of certain novels and poems, and in the discussion of movies seem appropriate to me.

Seventh grade is definitely not too soon to begin suggesting attitudes to youngsters. Certainly senior high school year is on the verge of being too late. Perhaps a first carefully organized and specific effort ought to come about the time your youngsters have

their evenings free to go and come from their homes as they please. In the rural and suburban settings that would mean sophomore and junior high school years. It would probably be earlier in the inner city.

Whatever the time, the emphasis and approach ought to be the same. The emphasis should be on an examination of pornography, not of the students' or of current and general mores. The approach should be an analysis of the human values that inform the material and the implications of those values in actual personal relationships and intimacies.

I believe this sort of openness, while it will not banish the skin-hawks from your town (That's a different and terribly important battle front in this war.), and will not cause your students to cease reading or looking at an occasional piece of scatology, will go a long way toward giving them a durable and decent basis for keeping its effects minimal.